

**Sebastian Barry. *A Long Long Way*. London: Faber and Faber, 2005, 294 pp., £ 12.99, ISBN 0-571-21800-8.**

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“... they don’t write books about the likes of us. It’s officers and high-up people mostly”, is the complaint of one of the Privates in *A Long Long Way*. One of the purposes of Sebastian Barry’s book (shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2005) evidently was to rectify such a neglect. It is the story, told in deceptively simple terms, of one Willie Dunne who grows up in turn-of-the-century Dublin and in 1914, on the outbreak of the First World War, joins the Royal Dublin Fusiliers. After a brief period of training he is sent to Belgian Flanders and experiences the war in and out of the trenches with all its horrors and its brief spells of respite.

Barry, who was born more than forty years after the beginning of what is still referred to as the Great War and consequently could not rely on personal memories, has recreated with amazing clarity all the different facets of the Flanders campaign. He describes in graphic detail (“The approach trench was a reeking culvert with a foul carpet of crushed dead”) such archetypal incidents as the initial encounter with the front-line situation, the horrors of the first poison-gas attack and the ensuing panic of a precipitous retreat, the shocking experience of killing an enemy soldier and the equally shocking sight of a soldier who refused to ‘cooperate’ being executed by firing squad, the brief exhilaration of success and the lasting despair of defeat, the small joys of a letter from home or a tin of hot stew and the relief of furlough in Ireland, the boredom during long periods of inactivity and the senseless exercises in the reserve lines, the unsentimental companionship in the trenches and the poignant grief of losing yet another mate. Superimposed on these typical experiences is the simple story of Willie Dunne, his devotion to his sisters, his doomed love affair with a sweet nonentity from the Dublin slums, his short-lived friendship with the man executed for his convictions, and most importantly his precarious relationship with his father, Chief Superintendent of the Dublin Metropolitan Police and a loyal follower of the King (familiar from Barry’s earlier play *The Steward of Christendom*). With the one exception of the unlikely intrigue that ends Willie’s love affair, all this is rendered immediately credible and convincing. To emphasize the senselessness of the war, Willie, in a scene somewhat overcharged with symbolism, is eventually killed a few days before the Armistice.

Barry describes all this, in third-person (or ‘figural’) narrative, as seen through the eyes of Willie Dunne whose lack of comprehension for all larger issues is one of the central impressions the book leaves with the reader, while the quiet humour of his observations (a fellow soldier “had a Cork accent like an illness”) saves Willie from the

role of helpless victim. Nevertheless – this is one of the miracles that Barry performs – Willie’s naïve thoughts and emotions are conveyed in a poetic language of highly original similes and metaphors which, amazingly, do not jar on Barry’s depiction of the protagonist’s simple mind. Going to sleep in a billet behind the lines, “he fell down between the boards of memory and sleep like a penny in an old floor.” Such images are not concentrated in moments of high emotional intensity but saturate the narrative at every point: “The spring sun ran along the river like a million skipping stones.” Naturally Barry’s third-person narration prevents him (or permits him to abstain) from getting into the mind of any of the other characters, which emphasizes the book’s concentration on Willie Dunne.

On the surface, then, this is yet another book about the Great War, ninety years after Patrick MacGill’s *The Great Push*, albeit one of exceptional atmospheric intensity. At the same time, however, like so much of Irish literature, *A Long Long Way* has a solid substratum of political/historical facts. This is true not only of the actual war events where various specific battles – at Hulluch, Guinchy, Guillemont, Wytschaete, Langemarck, the Messines Ridge etc. – and a number of other events such as the Xmas Truce of 1914 or the Dardanelles landings, are mentioned or even described in considerable detail. It is even more true of the condition of Ireland during the war. Willie Dunne is named after William of Orange and grows up in an atmosphere of unreflected loyalty to the British Crown. His father, the Police Inspector who led the baton charge on the crowd in Sackville Street during the Larkinite Strike of 1913, is a staunch supporter of the status quo. He stands for the one extreme in the conflict of loyalties that was beginning to tear Ireland apart in the course of the war. The other extreme is, of course, represented by the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising whose fate is referred to again and again in the novel. Willie himself becomes inadvertently involved in the Rising when he and some other soldiers, on the way back to Flanders from a short furlough in Dublin, observe the disastrous cavalry attack on the Post Office and are then ordered to take part in what was later known, somewhat hyperbolically, as the Battle of Mount Street Bridge, where the troops fire on the insurgents and Willie witnesses the death of a Volunteer right in front of him.

In the course of the novel, much is made of the irony inherent in the term ‘volunteer’. Willie is one of the volunteers who make up the 16<sup>th</sup> Division in Kitchener’s New Army after John Redmond had persuaded the majority of the Irish Volunteers to join up on the understanding that ‘England will keep faith’ and grant Home Rule to Ireland after the end of the war. Redmond’s brother even volunteers for army service and is killed at the front. Willie Dunne and his mates then are on a par with Carson’s Ulster Volunteers who make up the 36<sup>th</sup> (the ‘Ulster’) Division and sometimes jeer at the Southern Irish but also fight side by side with them. And the insurgents in Dublin, those who did *not* follow Redmond’s advice, are also volunteers who believe they are fighting in a righteous course. Barry admirably captures the growing unease, even confusion among the Irish soldiers at the front, especially when they realise that they

are suspected of 'rebel' leanings and are not trusted any longer by the commanding officers ("What the fuck are they doing, causing mayhem at home, when we're out here fucking risking our fucking lives for them?"). Willie's bewilderment increases when he is spat on in the streets of Dublin by youngsters who despise his uniform and denigrate him as a 'Tommy'. Much of this may escape a reader outside Ireland, but for anyone familiar with the Irish situation it soon becomes clear that Barry has written a book not only about one Willie Dunne but about twentieth-century Ireland, where the Great War became a persistent trauma.

In the final analysis, this is a timely book. The title is highly appropriate because the novel was published at the end of a long process in Ireland of coming to terms with the conflicting roles of Irishmen during the First World War. The ridicule and spite that Willie and his mates experienced in the streets of Dublin – "these ruined men, these doomed listeners, these wretched fools of men come out to fight a war without a country to their name, the slaves of England and the kings of nothing" – continued well into the last decades of the twentieth century. Barry's book will perhaps help at last to lay at rest the ghosts of the past.